The Value of Culture: Sketch of a Strategic Narrative for Cultural Relations Beyond the Soft Power Approach

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ABSTRACT: This note opts for a strategic narrative approach instead of a soft power approach to consider cultural relations among countries. It defines cultural relations as relations focusing not on particular values of any one culture, national, regional, ethnic, linguistic or whatever, but on the value of culture in general: a second-order value which consists in encouraging culture contact, culture comparison and culture reflection, leaving to any audience a possible choice which values in what combination to adopt for their understanding of life, work or projects. A strategic narrative, then, consists in opening the space for a cultural design able to come up with ideas about past, present and future, about social partners and about events, technologies and arts thus constituting a possible story and a possible network to rely on and to develop further. The second-order value of culture is the product of a specifically modern understanding of culture, yet it may turn out to be of even more use as soon as we look at a new digital age which turns all reputed social constants of old into variables of societal transformation. Cultural institutions like British Council or Goethe Institute draw on the value of culture to be renowned for library services, teachings, educational projects and artistic events which open the space for cultural reflection. They propagate their respective country for its ability to envision a pluralistic, connective and divergent world culture where governments and states are among many actors trying to get their footing. The note concludes with an idea about the mapping of networks of cultural work.

1. Cultural relations among countries at the beginning of twenty-first century are no longer colonial or imperial as they were considered to be in nineteenth century and were replaced by relations of development aid, economic dependence and political domination in twentieth century. Considerable differences in political clout, economic strength and technological development remain prevalent, yet they do not translate any more into ideas of cultural advantage even though links between political resilience, economic flexibility and technological innovation, on one hand, and a culture of openness, curiosity and experiment are evident. Instead, any one country meant to maintain cultural relations with another refers to a world culture of a plurality of values forcing any one culture of old into a realization of the contingency of its ways of life. This *world culture of contingency*, i.e. of a historical, regional and reflexive knowledge of one's own culture as just one among alternative others, calls for cultural relations which consist in opening spaces for encounters, aesthetic

experiences, moments of education, discovery of subjectivity and formation of empathetic personality.

2. Cultural relations move from the propagation of particular cultural values, including those of humanism, enlightenment and liberation, which are way too dependent on a specifically European belief in reason, to a general reflection on *the value of culture itself*. We may speak of a second-order culture which has its value in its ability to collect and compare, to mesh and mash, to reflect and judge particular values seeing a kind of worth in any one of them as long as they are able to give orientation to how people live, work, die and are remembered. The value of culture consists in being able to reflect one's culture and to think again about the formation of gender, age, subjectivity, memories and expectations. Out of this value of culture a new world culture emerges which is a culture of choices, decisions, and selections, a "grid culture", to use Mary Douglas' term, which, to be sure, more often than not may be heavily contested by "group cultures" (Douglas 1982). "Grid" refers to options perceived in a society surrounding one's group, whereas "group" refers to the places, activities, people and institutions producing identities of belonging. For Mary Douglas any one culture consists of both aspects of group and grid, of incorporation and individuation, yet there is quite some variety in how those two aspects take shape and are linked to each other. There are groups exploring and exploiting grids for continuous change; and there are groups relying on grids to defend themselves against and become fundamentalist or "identitarian". One possible definition of the value of culture, then, consists in being able to look at how group and grid interfere and to be able to opt for new alignments between them. A cultural relation is an invitation to reconsider group and grid, being well aware of the fact that the relation itself is part of the grid.

3. The value of culture considered a second-order value of possible choices among first-order values is part of a *strategic narrative* replacing the idea that cultural relations are ways to exert a kind of soft power among countries, nations or states still seeking to influence each other despite any hard power consisting of military, political and economic means proved unable to order a pluralistic, connected and diverse world society.

Soft power was meant to help people develop preferences in line with the preferences of the state exerting that kind of power (Nye Jr. 1990). Instead of forcing a divergent will into compliance by hard power, soft power is conceived of as helping the right will to be formed

by itself. Yet, it was soon to be discovered that governments do not control the means to exert that kind of soft power as preferences of any kind are the product of society much more than of its political representation (Nye Jr. 2004: 99ff.). And it became evident, moreover, that soft power, if indeed it may justly be called "power", does not come without being able to threat, that is to threat with consequences even worse if the right will would not be formed out of its own deliberation (Bially Mattern 2005). Power without being able to threaten and, to be sure, without having to deliver on the threat is not power but powerlessness (Luhmann 1979). Bially Mattern speaks of a "representational force" in soft power which consists in having to threaten people with prospects of the life of victims rather than of liberated subjects in order to be able to exert its influence. Soft power is meant to "represent" a way of life one rejects only at one's own risk. That is, the approach of soft power assumes an asymmetry between countries considering one to exert an influence to be accepted by the other. The approach thus is not exactly in line with an approach talking instead about symmetrical cultural relations.

If the exertion of soft power is still part of one possible strategic narrative within cultural diplomacy, the talk of a second-order value of culture is part of another. The term "strategic narrative" was invented in military strategy thinking to account for the need to rethink strategy in times of asymmetric and diffused wars and connective and complex publics being both close witness to, and elements of, military and para-military campaigns (Freedman 2006; Y 2011; see also Hoskins/O'Loughlin 2010; Gillespie et al. 2010). Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle adopt the term to recommend its use in the establishment and maintenance of cultural relations which do not turn a blind eye to military, political, economic and technological differences among countries yet refuse to exploit cultural relations to confirm a setting among actors which legitimizes those differences or seeks for alliances to expand them. Instead, drawing on Kenneth Burke's "grammar of motives" they recommend to contextualize cultural relations within a knowledge of, and a fostering of, strategic narratives able to explain, and reflect upon, actors seeking their identities, exploring settings open for cooperation, receiving and accepting conflicts in search for both expression and resolution and indeed testing resolutions or their suggestion bound to be supported by both action and thinking (Miskimmon/O'Loughlin/Roselle 2013; Roselle/O'Loughlin/ Miskimmon 2014; and see Burke 1969). Strategic narratives frame how cultural relations, their establishment, their turns and their development, may be understood with respect to questions of international relations, national identities and issues suitable to foster an understanding of the value of culture.

4. Questions of the need to reconsider cultural relations among countries, nations and states do not come as a surprise. The specifically *modern notion of culture* is a notion which insists on identities of any kind only to be able to compare them among each other and to trace how any one identity is the product not of deep structures within ethnic societies but of contacts among different cultures and the way how those contacts are dealt with (Williams 1958; Luhmann 1995; Bateson 2000). Modern culture is a culture not of identity but of distinction and contingency (Baecker 1997, 2001, 2008, 2014). To maintain cultural relations which accept and propagate the value of culture as a second-order value means to invite comparison, to encourage reflection and to receive the arts as well as education and formation ("*Bildung*") as spaces where comparison and reflection can be experimented with. Moreover, as modern culture changes for *a culture of next society* being a network society within new media ecologies consisting of both old media like language, writing and printing and new electronic and digital media (Castells 1996; Baecker 2007, 2007/8, 2011) that second-order value of culture becomes a value to reconsider anew relationships between nature and nurture, body and mind, consciousness and society, time and space, technology and culture which were taken for granted in modern society. New media are placing all countries and publics on the same level field to need to reconsider their institutions, theories and problems with respect to digital transformation. Cultural relations become relations which look at the very fabric of world society turning ethnic, religious and linguistic cultures into a repertoire of possible choices among their values, beliefs and customs and even of the emergence and evaluation of new values, beliefs and customs. Cultural diplomacy then is a way to find and define spaces where people can ask and answer the question of how they would like to live.
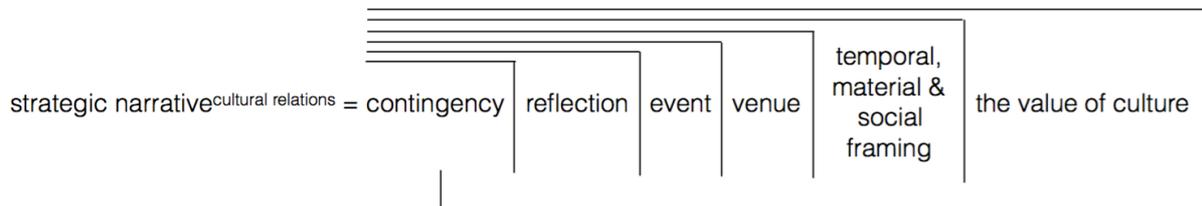
5. Cultural relations need a strategic narrative which is knowledgeable about the network of temporal relations between past, present and future, of social relations between ego and alter ego, and of physical and technological relations between artefacts, machines, symbols, sounds, visions, tastes and touches out of which via decoupling and embedding human beings create their life, their understanding of life and their social way to enlarge, defend and negotiate it (White 1992, 2008). Culture, as Bronislaw Malinowski with perhaps a touch of too much biological functionalism to it already had it, consists of *a constant and conflict-ridden rebalancing of body, mind, society, technology, and environment* (Malinowski 1944). Yet, such an understanding seems prescient for our present situation which is "digitally", so to speak, turning all kinds of reputed constants of the human condition into variables to be mined and reformatted anew. A strategic narrative informing fruitful cultural relations is a

narrative which knows about the complexity of the human condition, accounts for the loss of any overriding teleological order (be it Nature, God, History, Progress or, indeed, Power) and yet offers a wealth of middle-range and short-range purposes and understandings to make sense of our situation and to give it a temporary direction. A strategic narrative tells stories bound to decompose soon, yet to nevertheless inform a next story to get out of it.

6. Cultural relations insist on *the value of culture as a gift enabling human beings to reflect on their way of life*. Artists may be joined by intellectuals, politicians, entrepreneurs, scientists, sportsmen, priests, students and various kinds of audiences to practice that kind of reflection even if it demands a little bit of negativity to be able to distinguish this from that.

7. A first idea on the *mapping of cultural relations within present media ecologies* ensues. It is an idea about networks consisting of control relations among identities uncertain about their reproduction (White 1992, 2008). Modelling a network demands at least the three dimensions of complementarity of roles and positions, of decoupling from certain contexts and of embedding within other contexts. The mapping of cultural relations thus may proceed by identifying a minimal set of actors with respect to their complements and of contexts political, economic, aesthetic etc. either decoupled from or referred to. The advantage of looking at complementary roles and positions consists in being able to map the network on different levels (nation, city, institution, program…) while still having for any one actor a complement he or she is operationally linked to. Presumably there is a certain set of levels which defines the minimal setting for any cultural work to be possible ranging from strategy via funding and venue to the event. A working network is one which comes up with an identity (a way to understand and advertise itself) anchored in those levels, differentiated from, and within, the overall society and able to reproduce at least for the time of a certain programme running. The network defines who is controlling whom in mutual relationships in order to more or less reliably maintaining that core identity which may turn out to be rather ephemeral if it only succeeds in constituting for a certain moment the value of culture.

8. A Spencer-Brownian (2008) form may show the variables – indications distinguished within indications – which a mapping of the network of cultural relations contains:

strategic narrative^{cultural relations} = | contingency | reflection | event | venue | temporal, material & social framing | the value of culture

This form may be considered the *eigen*-value of a recursive function (von Foerster 2003) differentiating and integrating audience, artists, directors, partners, funders and stakeholders all of them "composing" (Glanville 2015) the form by letting their divergent perspectives play. Via implicative negation or "joint falsehood" (Russell 1993: 149) all of those indications – distinctions drawn by observers – are interdependently linked to each other without at any point defining anything like a necessary composition. The value of culture consists in being able to experience contingency (i.e., possibility to be otherwise; or the double negation of impossibility and necessity) as a kind of medium to combine, dissolve and recombine ways to perceive and to design a world.

9. The work of cultural institutions like British Council, Goethe Institute and others, firmly anchored in European enlightenment tradition and committed to human rights like human dignity, physical integrity, religious freedom, freedom of opinion, freedom of research and teaching, freedom of assembly, democracy and entrepreneurship consists in letting the experience of contingency not just happen but in framing, containing and cultivating it in ways compatible with audiences and policies abroad. The mark of a cultural constitution grows out of its ways to deal with audiences and policies not always in line with each other. The "national" culture a cultural institution is meant to bring to the attention of foreign countries is embodied in its ways to raise a political awareness of the value of culture being independent from, yet not insensible towards, political and economic interests. The value of culture consisting in the experience of contingency may be raised and indicated by arts and education, but arts and education in turn are related to politics, economy, religion, and technologies of information and communication and should bear witness of those relations.

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